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Fish Story

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Fish Story

"All right, you just sit right here on the bank, I'm gonna fish for my dinner while I tell you my story. Here, let me take off that blindfold so's you can see, it's ok here. You're the first one I've let see me in years, let alone ask me questions."

The old man put on his green rubber waders and walked out into the river up to his thighs. He placed a large, gray, minnow shaped lure on his line and cast it toward the far bank.

"Don't you go moving around, you just sit right there where I can watch you."

"What? You want to know when it began? Well, I suppose that's as good a place to start as any, at the beginning. Just let me give you a little background first."

Having just finished reeling in his first cast, he paused while he flung the lure again toward the opposite bank, some thirty yards across the brown water.

"You see, I've been fishing this river since about '13, yeah it was '13. Before that I had been travelling around trying to set things right. City to city, state to state, I tried to tell them that it just wasn't right. They didn't care, they didn't even have to say a word. They just let us run around in circles. . . they knew they had us beat. Time was on their side."

"In '11, yeah, I'd been seeing her for just about a year. Well it was in '11 that I wanted to get married and start a family. . . "

"What? Oh, you've got to be kiddin' me! Married. Married. You don't know what married means. Holy. . . well, I have been out here for a while. Married is, was, when a man and a woman were in love, and they wanted to live together forever and start a family, you know, have kids."

The old man waded a little upstream, though never letting me out of his sight, and cast again toward the opposite shore. He reeled his lure in methodically, slowly.

"Well, anyhow, she had other ideas. She just up and left me one day. . . out of the blue. Sure she left me a note, but that didn't help me any, it just got me more worked up. Her note was simple, to the point. It said, 'Dear Adam, I don't need you any more. Love, Gloria'. She was never much for words."

"Oh, yeah. So from then on out, that is until '13, I spent half of my time looking for her, and the other half trying to convince them that what they were doing was wrong, really, really, wrong."

"Once, I ran into one of them in Seattle, no, maybe it was Portland. Well anyways, this was one of the few of them that would even talk, most of them just smiled. So I says 'What you're doing is wrong, it's unnatural' and the reply I got was 'Too bad, we're doing it. You're future is in a museum.'"

"So like I said, I been up her since '13. It was in that year that I heard that, and it was in that year that I decided to turn tail. They hadn't decided to kill off anyone yet, don't get me wrong, but I got the feeling they might. You know, just to speed things up a little."

The old man cast his lure again into the muddied waters, reeling his lure back in the same steady fashion.

"I don't know, I was optimistic. I was hoping that things would get back to normal on there own, maybe that they would realize on their own exactly what they were doing. Shit. . ."

The old man's lure had hit a snag in the murky river waters. He strained, bending his pole into a c shape before the line finally broke free. He quickly reeled in the slack line.

"From the looks of you, and what you been asking, things are never gonna get back to normal."

The old man looked at me inquisitively, rather gravely, before he again cast upstream.

"Well, anyhow, I imagine you're tired of all of that personal stuff. I suppose I'll start in with the story of how it all began, well. . . the beginning of the end. Just let me know if you need anything, I got tons of fresh water and dried salmon. . . hunh, dried salmon. Well I got plenty if you want a taste."

"How old did you say you were? You didn't? Oh, well how old are you? Sheeeiit, nine-teen, well you don't know nothing about anything do ya'. So that means that you were born, well conceived, or whatever, in '43 or so. Boy, I have been up here a while."

"Well, things began on this very river in '84 I believe, yeah it was '84. Hang on a second while I get something to chew on."

The old man reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a pouch of chewing tobacco. He removed a rather large wad and placed it in his mouth, compressing it under his cheek. The hair on his face kind of bristled and stuck out when he chewed. He had an awful lot of hair on his face, more than I'd ever seen.

"I'll bet you're wondering how I get a hold of this stuff, aren't you? Well, you see, every time I need a little something, you know, fuel for my lamps, or matches, or something, I sneak down river, now this is just between you and me, I sneak down river to Loraine's Tradin' post and break in and take whatever I need. It was quite surprise to find a carton of Red Man in the back, so I took that too. It was all covered with dust and grime. I think Loraine must of been saving it, cause I knows they don't make it no more."

"Any way, just a couple of miles upstream there was a place called the Oregon Salmon Hatchery, I believe it started up in the summer of '52, quite a while before my time. Well anyways, the men who started it up

thought they would supply all those restaurants out east with all the salmon they wanted, so they set up all these hatching pools directly fed by the waters of this river.”

“Yes, I believe it was run by all men at that time, women weren’t exactly accepted in the work place. They just kind of stayed home and took care of the family, or maybe they taught, or nursed, or were secretaries or something. You may find it hard to believe, but that’s the way it was. Men ran everything.”

“So anyhow, this hatchery did real good business, and they were always trying to stay ahead, you know, do better than the competition. Well, it was in ‘84 when they introduced science into the business, and that’s when things started up.”

“How do I know this? Well, my Daddy worked in this place, and he told me all of this before he died.”

“What? What’s a ‘Daddy’? Jesus. Well, let me try to explain. My daddy, well that’s my father, he and my mother got married when they were young and started a family.”

“Well, anyways, they brought the scientists in in ‘84 to try to get the edge. That’s when it changed from the Oregon Salmon Hatchery to the Oregon Salmon Hatchery and Breederly. They were trying to breed the best tasting salmon in the cheapest, most economical fashion.”

Between casts the old man placed his rod under his arm to wipe his forehead. The morning sun was getting warmer, and small beads of sweat were appearing on his forehead. He removed his hat, revealing a balding head. The top of his head didn’t have any hair. It was shiny, kind of like a small infants head. He cast again towards the opposite shore, spitting as he began to reel it in.

“Oh, now don’t rush me, we got all day. Let me take my time and tell you the story straight, I don’t want to skip nothing. You need to know the truth.”

“So these scientists, all of them men, began to try to find out the best way to breed salmon. Well, what they discovered is what started this whole thing. They did their tests and their experiments, all kinds of stuff, and what they discovered was that the female salmon grew larger and tasted better than the males. So what they did was try to figure a way to breed only female salmon.”

“They solved that problem right away. They started fooling around with these salmon’s genetics, you know, their genes, what made them what they were before they were even hatched. Well, eventually, I believe it was in ‘87 or ‘88, they discovered a way to breed only female salmon. They rigged the female salmon so’s all they would have was more female salmon, and the remarkable thing was this. . .”

The old man stopped to spit in the river, again casting his lure to the opposite shore.

"God damn those salmon, they made it so the female salmon didn't even need the male salmon to do it. The female salmon laid the eggs and fertilized them themselves, on their own. They didn't even need the male salmon."

The man stopped and placed his rod under his arm again. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a crumpled piece of paper.

"You see this, this is an article from the New York Times, I've had it with me for years. My daddy gave it to me on his death bed. Here look at it, it explains everything."

He handed me the article. It was dated August 15, '90. It explained everything about the breeding of the female salmon.

"You see this. . ."

The old man had removed a pink lure from his hat, he held it up like a prized possession for my inspection.

"This is my baby, my lucky lure, it never fails me. This one used to work well, but I think it's lost its charm."

The old man removed the gray, minnow shaped lure from the end of his line. He replaced it with his lucky one. It too was shaped like a minnow, but it was larger than the first, and more brightly colored. He expertly tied the knot at its nose, careful to avoid the two hooks that hung from its underbelly.

"Yep, this is my lucky one. I only use it when the salmon aren't particularly active. It never fails me."

The old man waded a little deeper into the water, moving a little further down stream before casting again to the opposite bank.

"You understand, this all didn't happen over night, it took years before it really began to have an affect. Apparently a few women scientists got a hold of this information and began a few tests of their own. They began testing it on American Eagles. They figured that since they were endangered species they would use the engineering to try to save the breed. You see, the bald eagle, that was the female eagle, was more beautiful and more able to stand up to the harsher conditions. So sure enough, after a few years the eagle was no longer endangered because it bred the stronger female types."

"So after that, they tried it on other species, the Panda bear, the tortoise, animals like that, trying to stop them from dying out. It worked, all those animals survived and reclaimed their lost numbers in a matter of a few years. What we didn't realize was that some of the more radical women scientists had other ideas."

The old man reeled in his line. He turned toward the bank and began to wade in.

"This story's gonna have to wait a minute. Nature calls."

He laid his rod down next to me and began to walk into the woods.

"Don't you go nowhere's honey, this'll just take a second, then I'll finish my story."

The old man had advanced a few yards into the woods and stopped right next to a tree. He turned his back to me, turning his head so he could see me in the corner of his eye. He began to fiddle with his waders, letting them drop around his knees. He then unfastened his pants, standing still and holding something.

"What, what's that? Well of course I'm standing up, don't they teach you anything?"

At that point the old man began to laugh like he had never heard anything so funny.

"Well," he said, laughing "I guess they really wouldn't get into the particulars about how its done, now would they?"

With that he fastened his pants and hiked up his waders. He didn't stop laughing until he was back in the river, holding his rod, preparing to cast.

"Well, anyways, all this happened about the time when I was a young boy, growing up and learning to fish this river."

"Well, what also was happening was that these women had been experimenting on other women too. They were fixing their genes the same way they fixed those other animals, the same way they fixed the salmon."

"It didn't catch on fast, it took a couple of years. The whole time there was never any news of it until it was too late. That was just about the time my fiancee, that's the girl I was gonna marry, left me, just about the time when we began to realize what was happening. But it was too late."

The old man again cast his lure to the other shore.

"Well that's when the shit really hit the fan. Women from all over the place left their husbands to go get there DNA altered. They never explained themselves, they just took off and got fixed, that's what we called it. We kind of joked about it at first, but it didn't take long for the humor to wear off. I think my daddy knew what was coming, because he taught me how to fish, and how to get around out here in the shelter of these hills. You see. . ."

At that moment the old man violently yanked his rod upward, setting the hooks into the mouth of his catch.

"I told you, it never fails."

The old man firmly reeled in his catch, grunting and wading back toward the shore.

"Quick hand me that net over there."

I handed him the net that was laying on the bank beside me, next to his tackle box.

"This ones a fighter, she's giving me all she's got."

The old man plunged the net into the water around his feet. He quickly pulled the net from the water, ensnaring the struggling salmon.

"You see, I was one of the last men born the old way, you know naturally, from sex between a man and a woman. That's the way we used to make babies. That was in '91."

The old man stepped from the water with his catch, kneeling on the bank beside me.

"You see, look at this, look familiar?"

The old man held up the salmon in front of me, removing his lure that was attached to its jaw.

"Look at that, she's a female, but she's got the extra parts. The last time I pulled a male from this river was in '15, the fall of 2015. He wasn't that big, maybe eight pounds, and he wasn't as colorful as this one. Well, I pulled him from the water fully intent on making him my dinner. But he had this look in his eyes, he looked really scared, like he was trying to swim away from something he knew would catch him. I threw him back."

Again, he showed me the underbelly of the salmon. It looked normal, egg pouch and fertilizing duct between its rear belly fins.

"Since then, I've only caught these."

Jim Dixon